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## USADA files formal charges against Lance Armstrong

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AUSTIN, Texas (AP) – The U.S. Anti-Doping Agency has filed formal charges against Lance Armstrong, accusing the seven-time Tour de France winner of using performance-enhancing drugs throughout the best years of his career.

The agency notified Armstrong, former team manager Johan Bruyneel and several other Armstrong team associates of the charges in a letter on Thursday.

The charges came after a USADA review panel examined evidence in the case, which now goes to an arbitration panel to decide. If found guilty, Armstrong could be stripped of the Tour de France titles he won from 1999-2005. This year's Tour de France begins Saturday.

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Armstrong maintains his innocence. Armstrong attorney Robert Luskin called the charges "wrong and baseless."

Also charged are team doctors Pedro Celaya Lezama and Luis Garcia del Moral, team trainer Pepe Marti and consulting doctor Michele Ferrari. Because they are so closely linked, USADA rolled all the charges into a single case.

By Nathalie Magniez, AFP/Getty Images

The U.S. Anti-Doping Agency says its review board has made a unanimous recommendation to file formal doping charges against Lance Armstrong.

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Armstrong and the others "(have) been part of a doping conspiracy involving team officials, employees, doctors and elite cyclists," said the USADA letter, a copy of which was obtained by the Associated Press.

The letter accuses Armstrong of using, possessing and trafficking banned substances, including the blood-booster EPO, blood transfusions and steroids. The charges date to 1998, after he had been declared cancer-free but before his first Tour de France victory the following summer.

Bruyneel, who is currently the manager of the Radioshack

-Nissan-Trek team recently announced he would skip this year's Tour because of the USADA investigation.

USADA says it has at least 10 former Armstrong teammates and associates who will testify against the cyclist, and blood samples from 2009 and 2010 that are "fully consistent" with blood doping.

Armstrong and the others charged have until July 9 to inform USADA if they plan to challenge the evidence before an arbitration panel.

Armstrong, 40, retired from cycling last year. In February a two-year federal investigation centering on alleged drug use by Armstrong and his teams closed with no charges filed.

"It is the entirely predictable product of USADA's toxic obsession with Lance Armstrong and a process in which truth is not a priority," Lusk said. "There is not one shred of credible evidence to support USADA's charges and an unbroken record of more than 500 clean tests over more than a decade and a half to refute it."

The formal charges came after a unanimous recommendation from a three-person USADA review panel that looked at the evidence.

"All respondents will have the opportunity to exercise their right to a full public arbitration hearing, should they so choose, where all evidence would be presented, witness testimony would be given under oath," USADA said in a statement.

"USADA will continue to follow the established procedures that are compliant with federal law and were approved by athletes, the U.S. Olympic Committee, and all Olympic sports organizations."

The arbitration panel could meet by November, USADA said, but Lusk hinted Armstrong may file a federal lawsuit in an attempt to stop or delay the USADA investigation.

"Mr. Armstrong is exploring all his legal options," Lusk said.

Earlier in the day Armstrong had gone on the attack against one of the review board members, Minneapolis attorney Clark Griffith, using his Twitter account to note that Griffith this year had been charged in a misdemeanor case of indecent exposure.

"Wow. @usantidoping can pick em. Here's ... 1 of 3 Review Board members studying my case," Armstrong tweeted, linking to an online story about Griffith.

Griffith entered an Alford plea June 13. Under the plea, Griffith did not admit doing anything wrong but acknowledged prosecutors have enough evidence for a jury to convict him. A 24-year-old student reported Griffith unzipped his pants in front of her on a St. Paul street.

Sentencing is scheduled for July 26. Griffith told the AP he's innocent and entered the plea to avoid a trial that would embarrass his family.

Griffith said Armstrong's tweet was "an effort to get away from the issues that will be dealt with by an arbitration panel. OK? By smearing me, that does nothing. I'm innocent of that."

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USADA has not publicly released most of its evidence against Armstrong. Griffith would not discuss Armstrong's case in detail but said, "He's really scrambling .... I can't wait to hear what the arbitration panel thinks of the evidence."

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